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# Debussy's Life through His Letters

By

Phaik Suan Quah

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of the requirements for  
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## ABSTRACT

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ADVISOR: Dianne McMullen

This thesis explores the life and works of French composer Claude Debussy through his letters. These letters were compiled by François Lesure and translated by Roger Nichols. Several topics of interest emerged from reading Debussy's letters, including his relationships with his closest friends throughout his lifetime, his experiences as winner of the Prix de Rome, his struggles, his perception of works written by other composers, his perception of music, and his perception of his own music.

Debussy's letters give the reader unique insights into his life. He relied on his friends for support and they were imperative to his success. This was especially true while he was struggling with his marriages, his finances, his friendships, and most importantly his work. Debussy's works were influenced by his experiences. He began his novel stylistic writing while he was in Rome and strove to create simple yet artistic music. The arts were seemingly limitless to him, and likewise, his music changed just as he did.

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## **Preface**

Many people know Debussy as an Impressionist composer who had a tremendous influence on composers after him. He created new colors in the sounds of his music that left a mark on twentieth-century music. One of the big questions that led me to this thesis was why Debussy decided to change his stylistic writing in music. I knew that in order to answer this question I first had to understand who Debussy was. Professor Dianne McMullen and I decided that his letters were an excellent source to learn more about Debussy as a composer and person. We spent our first three months analyzing all three hundred and ten of Debussy's extant letters and synthesized them. We took detailed notes and arranged the notes first according to the person to whom Debussy was writing and then chronologically. Debussy was an eloquent and humorous writer. There were times I was completely drawn in to his writing and other times I chuckled at his sense of humor. This thesis is based on what I have learned about Debussy and his music through his letters. It highlights the important aspects of his life that I believe to be important in understanding who he was.

Suan Quah

November 24, 2014

## Introduction

A French composer who is best remembered for his harmonic innovations, Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was one of the most prominent and influential composers of his time. He wrote many letters, many of which survived over the years. This thesis aims to discover who Debussy was as a person and a composer through his letters. It is based on the collection of his letters compiled by François Lesure and translated into English by Roger Nichols (Debussy). The first of these letters was written in 1884 after Debussy had won the Prix de Rome and the last in late 1917, a few months before his death. Through a careful reading of these letters, one learns much about his ideas, personality, and relationships.

Part of understanding Debussy as a person is to identify his most important relationships as revealed through his letters. Chapter One, "Debussy's Friends," highlights the people who had distinctive influences on his life and career. It aims to describe their impact on his life and how he perceived them individually. This chapter reveals things about Debussy's personality. The types of people Debussy associated himself with in different moments of his life also say a lot about who he was at the time.

The next chapter, "Debussy's Years in Italy as Winner of the Prix de Rome," identifies the circumstances that compelled him to move to Rome, his life in Rome, and his thoughts on Rome. The chapter reveals some of the significant people in his life at the time and how they affected his life there. Debussy made

some important decisions about his music while he was living in Rome. The influences that prompted him to make those decisions reveal more of who he was.

Recognizing some of the struggles that Debussy experienced is another way of understanding him as a person and a composer. Chapter Three brings forth some of the personal problems Debussy faced in his life and the influences they had on his career. This chapter calls to attention his financial situation, relationships, and limitations. Debussy's struggles present him as an ordinary person, which is vital in getting to know Debussy's life. However, it is more important to recognize how these problems shaped him into a successful composer.

The following chapter aims to communicate Debussy's perception of composers from before and during his time. Some of the composers he mentioned in his letters who made lasting impressions on his perception of music include Palestrina, Lassus, Bach, Rameau, Wagner, and Stravinsky. The chapter describes specific things he liked and disliked about the composers and discusses the techniques they used that he wanted to keep in his new stylistic writing.

Having distinguished between the qualities of some prominent composers, it is also pertinent to understand how Debussy perceived music. Chapter Five, "Debussy's Perception of Music," discusses Debussy's thoughts on music and the different influences that helped shape his views. The chapter also

discusses the changes in his perception of music and some of the things that influenced those changes.

After learning about Debussy experiences and perceptions, it is most important to determine what he was trying to achieve in his own music. This is the topic of the last chapter, “Debussy’s Perception of His Own Works.” In his letters he wrote about *Zuleima* (1885), *Diane au bois* (1883-1885), *Printemps* (1887), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893-1900), and other works. Through these letters one learns more about Debussy’s goals. The overall impression is of a person continuously searching for new modes of expression.



## **Chapter One**

### **Debussy's Friends**

Many accounts of Debussy's life portray him as unsociable and reserved. Vallas describes him as having "little strength of character". He distanced himself from most musicians and tended towards writers and artists, believing he shared more things in common with them (Vallas 53-54). Because his music was well beyond his time, it is understandable why he shared so little in common with the musicians. He was never able to hide the negative feelings he had towards anyone, even though he was always pleasant towards those he liked (Lockspeiser 21). He never felt the need to please anyone, which others often interpreted as a lack of friendliness.

Even so, Debussy had several close friends and was loyal to them. He often declared his affection towards them in his letters, to the point of calling himself an "affection freak." Debussy confided only in his closest friends and confessed to being overly reliant on their friendships. He enjoyed the comfortable relationship with this intimate circle of friends because he was able to express himself without having to explain himself. Some of these friendships ultimately came to an end.

Debussy's intimate circle of friends played various important roles in his career. Many of them were able to advise him on his music while others helped him through difficult times (Debussy 8). This chapter explores his relationships

with the Vasniers, Robert Godet, Pierre Louÿs, Jacques Durand, André Caplet, and the Popelins.

### *The Vasniers*

After Debussy left his family for Paris, he spent most of his afternoons and often evenings studying and composing at the Vasnier household. This lasted from 1880 until 1884. Eugène-Henri Vasnier was a Parisian building contractor, architect, and an intellectual with fine taste for the arts. His wife, Marie-Blanche Vasnier, who was eleven years younger, was a beautiful and gifted amateur singer. She had an exciting social life with many admirers (Cobb and Miller 40). Debussy and Mme. Vasnier met in 1880 at Madame Moreau-Sainti's singing classes where Debussy worked as an accompanist (Vallas 16). Mme. Vasnier became Debussy's first love.

The Vasniers provided Debussy with the scholarly environment he never had while living with his family. According to Marguerite Vasnier, the Vasniers' daughter and Debussy's student, Debussy had requested permission to study at their apartment in Paris, which M. Vasnier granted. M. Vasnier gave Debussy a private study with a piano (Cobb and Miller 40). He advised Debussy on literary and artistic matters (Lockspeiser 19). Every day during the summer, Debussy traveled to the Vasniers' country house in Ville-d'Avray by train. There, M. Vasnier and Debussy shared many intellectual conversations and enjoyed each other's company (Cobb and Miller 40).

Debussy wrote forty songs during the five years he spent with the Vasniers' (Cobb and Miller 40). He wrote at least half of these for Mme. Vasnier

(Lesure). Judging by those pieces, Mme. Vasnier had a light and high-ranged voice. Paul Vidal, winner of the Prix de Rome in 1883 and friend to Debussy, claims that Mme. Vasnier was the best at interpreting Debussy's works (Cobb and Miller 41).

Debussy corresponded regularly with M. Vasnier while he was at the Villa Medici in Rome, after having won the Prix de Rome. Debussy became despondent over time and M. Vasnier was able to provide him with the proper guidance and support for him to continue his studies there. However, Debussy's loyalty might have been more toward Mme. Vasnier than toward her husband. One piece of evidence is in a letter he wrote to Claudius Popelin-Ducarre, his friend's father. There Debussy wrote that Mme. Vasnier was a determining factor in his decision to return to Paris (Debussy). Another piece of evidence is that his relationship with the Vasnier family did not last very long after he returned to Paris. While Lockspeiser wrote that it is unknown if M. Vasnier ever was aware of the affair, Cobb suggested that M. Vasnier had discovered the romantic relationship between Debussy and his wife. Supporting the hypothesis is the fact that the Vasniers moved to a different part of town and the family ceased all contact with Debussy soon after the composer's relocation to Paris (Cobb and Miller 43).

#### *Robert Godet*

Robert Godet was one of Debussy's few lifelong friends. Godet was a Swiss journalist and the son of a Protestant minister (Lockspeiser). Godet and

Debussy met in 1889 through Maurice Boucher, a French poet and sculptor. Debussy valued his friendship with Godet, claiming to be much happier with Godet's approval than those of the elite public. He believed that Godet understood the significance of his music and the artistic objectives he was trying to accomplish, that he could "read between the staves." He also dedicated several songs to Godet, including "Le son du cor s'afflige," "L'échelonnement des haies," and two of the *Trois melodies* on poems of Verlaine. Debussy often shared stories about his work, family, and performances with Godet. Godet was a friend Debussy trusted to unburden himself regardless of the matter. They maintained their friendship through letters because Godet spent most of his time living outside of Paris (Debussy).

### *Pierre Louÿs*

Pierre Louÿs was another close friend to Debussy. He was a writer and poet in Paris. They met in 1893 at the salon of Mallarmé, a French poet, and found that they shared the same love for music and literature. They enjoyed each other's company and visited art galleries together. Shortly after they first met, Debussy and Louÿs travelled to Ghent in order for Debussy to gain permission from Maeterlinck, a Belgium writer who wrote the text of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, to write an orchestral work on the text. Vallas describes Louÿs as Debussy's "director of literary conscience". They often reviewed and critiqued each other's works (Vallas 53). They also attempted to collaborate on several occasions.

Some of these works include *Cendrelune*, *Aphrodite*, and *La saulaie*. However, the only successful collaboration they had was on *Chansons de Bilitis* (Lesure).

They also took interest in one another's personal lives. When Louÿs was engaged to Mademoiselle Louise Hérédia, Debussy, delighted at the news, wrote a March for Louÿs in expression of his brotherly feelings towards Louÿs.

Likewise, Louÿs was around when Debussy was in a relationship with Gaby Dupont and helped him recover from his unsuccessful engagement with Thérèse Roger. Louÿs was also around to witness Debussy's first marriage to Rosalie (Lilly) Texier (Debussy). When Debussy left Lilly for Emma Bardac in 1904, Louÿs and a few of his friends were strongly against it. Lilly's attempted suicide only evoked more resentment towards Debussy and broke up several of his friendships. Louÿs displayed genuine sympathy and compassion towards Lilly by offering his home to her during this time. Louÿs eventually ceased all contact with Debussy. The two did, however, reconcile many years later (Clive 181).

### *Jacques Durand*

An important person in Debussy's career and life was his publisher. When Debussy's much-trusted publisher, Georges Hartmann, passed away in 1900, Debussy fell into a state of helplessness. He expressed his need for a publisher who could adjust to his "delicate little soul" and restrain others from going against him. He eventually entrusted Jacques Durand with the responsibility of becoming his publisher (Debussy). Debussy had gotten to know Durand while they were studying at the Conservatoire. Given Durand's prior experience at the

Conservatoire, he was knowledgeable in music and composition, which equipped him for editing and transcribing various musical works (R. S. Nichols). Durand was officially given exclusive publishing rights to Debussy's works in 1905 and worked closely with him until Debussy passed away in 1918. Durand partnered a French publishing firm with his father, Auguste Durand, and later his cousin Gatson Choisnel, whom Debussy did not trust to handle his works (Debussy).

After spending much time working alongside Debussy, Durand became a working partner and a close friend to Debussy. Debussy was able to speak at ease around Durand without fearing judgment. He trusted Durand enough to vent about issues others might have interpreted as unusual and shared new ideas on compositional techniques he would not have wanted others to know (Debussy).

### *André Caplet*

André Caplet, born in 1878, was sixteen years younger than Debussy. He entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1896 and won the Prix de Rome in 1901 before his career as a French composer and conductor. Caplet and Debussy met in 1907 and became close friends almost instantaneously. Caplet was fascinated by Debussy's harmonies and often turned to him for advice. Debussy admired Caplet's understanding of music as a complex and delicate art and believed that he was a gifted conductor. He trusted Caplet's artistic eye and at times requested that Caplet proofread his works. Caplet collaborated with Debussy on various

occasions; he was responsible for orchestrating part of Debussy's *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*. There were also recurring requests from Debussy for Caplet to conduct performances of his works (Orledge).

Caplet and Debussy worked well together. In 1911, they were invited by Henry Russell, manager of the Boston Opera House, to produce *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Boston. Debussy was forced to turn down Russell's offer because of his family, which had seemingly caused a falling out between him and Caplet. Nevertheless, the two reconciled after a short period of time (Debussy). Caplet spent the next four years conducting at the Boston Opera House. It was there that he conducted some of the best performances of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Orledge).

### *The Popelins*

Debussy shared an intimate friendship with the Popelins that was rarely found throughout his life. Gustave Popelin is the only recorded close friend that Debussy made in Rome. Popelin was Debussy's schoolmate at the Villa Medici. He was a painter and winner of the 1882 Prix de Rome in painting. He lived in Rome from 1883 to 1886, overlapping with the years Debussy spent there. Debussy's relationship with Popelin was especially unique because it was only in the letters to Popelin that Debussy ever openly announced his feelings towards Mme Vasnier. Debussy also wrote several letters to Popelin's father, Claudius Popelin-Ducarre, who was a renowned painter and poet. When Debussy decided to leave Rome, he planned on meeting with Gustave as soon as he returned to

Paris. However, there are no other records indicating that they remained in contact after Debussy returned to Paris (Cobb and Miller 44-48).

### *Conclusion*

Debussy's letters reveal a genuine side to him that he seldom allowed others to see. Even though he only kept a few close friends, he admitted to being lonesome at times and was in need of companionship, especially as a rebelling artist. He was sensitive, emotional, and easily discouraged by his work. His friends, however, supported and encouraged him in his work. The intellectual discussions they shared and advice they gave him on his music undoubtedly influenced his music writing and philosophy on music (Debussy).



## **Chapter Two**

### **Debussy's Years in Italy as Winner of the Prix de Rome**

Funded by the French government through the French Académie des Beaux-Arts and later the Paris Conservatoire, the Prix de Rome was an annual competition that awarded artists and composers the opportunity to reside and study in Rome. This competition was held between 1803 and 1968 as an attempt to promote the French culture (Gilbert). The Prix de Rome was a rigorous competition that examined contestants' musical knowledge and artistic abilities. First, they had to pass the preliminary round –Concours d'Essai –where they were asked to write a fugue based on a given subject and to set choral and orchestral music to various given texts.

Only a few were selected to proceed to the next round –the Concours Définitif. This round assessed the contestants' artistic abilities as they were asked to write a longer operatic scene for voice and orchestra. The contestants were sequestered in a room for a month with a piano, and visits from families were limited and under supervision (R. Nichols). These pieces were then brought before the members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts where they were voted on. The Prix de Rome winners received a stipend with the condition that they spend their first two years receiving instructions at the Villa Medici in Rome. The winners also received substantial support for their works. They were given the opportunity to perform their works, travel, and attend various cultural venues in Paris. Many young composers during this time saw this as an

opportunity to gain the publicity and monetary support that was needed in the earlier years of their careers (Gilbert).

Debussy entered the Prix de Rome competition for the first time in 1883 with his cantata *Le gladiateur*. He was runner-up to Paul Vidal. He competed again the following year and won with his cantata *L'enfant prodigue* on June 28, 1884. Debussy recognized the honor of winning this outstanding prize simultaneously realizing that he would have to give up considerable freedom. Beginning in early 1885, Debussy was to move to Rome, leaving behind the musical scene in Paris, his life with the Vasnier family, and his romance with Marie-Blanche Vasnier (R. Nichols). Debussy was receiving little to no income at this time and thus desperately needed the stipend from the Prix de Rome to support himself. In an attempt to avoid moving to Rome, he worked hard for several months, aiming to compete for the "Grand Prix Musical de La Ville de Paris." He did not finish the work in time (Debussy). Debussy reluctantly left Paris, determined not to enjoy his stay at the Villa Medici (R. Nichols).

The terrible weather upon his arrival at the Villa only exacerbated Debussy's dislike towards the place. In his letters to Eugène Vasnier, Debussy expressed absolute disappointment in seeing how his friends from Paris had changed after residing at the Villa for over a year. They were now egotistical, unfriendly, and constantly running each other down. His Parisian friends should have been familiar company for him during his time away from home. Their "every-man-for-himself" attitude only drove Debussy away from them and the Villa.

On the night of Debussy's arrival at the Villa, he was asked to perform his cantata for his fellow peers. It was then that he realized the musicians at the Villa Medici did not share his taste in music. He became indifferent towards the students and the artistic environment at the Villa and isolated himself from that scene. He avoided any involvement with life at the Villa. Students at the Villa believed that Debussy was trying to parade his individuality especially since his music strayed far from the norm. Yet, Debussy paid no attention to what people said about him. Instead, Debussy clung to his friendship with M. Vasnier by writing to him about once a month.

It was the letters from M. Vasnier that encouraged Debussy when he was feeling despondent. Debussy often reminisced about his time in Paris with M. Vasnier. Debussy felt indebted to M. Vasnier for welcoming him into his home. When Debussy arrived at the Villa Medici, he was unhappy and on the verge of returning to Paris. He believed he had more to gain from his mindless conversations with M. Vasnier than from the Villa. M. Vasnier convinced Debussy to stay in Rome. Debussy admitted to his overreliance on their friendship as he looked to M. Vasnier for emotional support and advice on his works. (Debussy).

Some have questioned Debussy's motivation in writing so frequently to M. Vasnier. They could have been intended to gain sympathy from Mme. Vasnier. Whatever the motivation, Debussy had respect for M. Vasnier, addressing him by his last name and signing off with admiration.

One aspect of Rome that pleased Debussy was the method of instruction. In France students were strictly bound to classes. In Rome they were free to

compose with almost no supervision. The students were expected to produce an *envoi* at the end of each year to show the Institute what they had done. Many students at the Villa struggled with this sudden lack of structure, especially since they were away from home, but Debussy saw this as an opportunity (R. Nichols). Debussy took full advantage of this freedom to produce original works. He was aware that the French Institute was opposed to new ideas, believing their own methods to be the only correct ones. Regardless, Debussy continued to embrace this opportunity to compose freely, as he intended to compensate his lack of physical freedom –his confinement at the Villa –with his newfound artistic freedom (Debussy).

After several months at the Villa, Debussy found life mundane and boring. His nature did not allow him to enjoy such tranquility and so he feared he was dwindling into mediocrity. He was working on his first *envoi*, *Zuleima*, when he grew tired of the extensive lines in his writing, which was the tasteful way of writing at the time; he found them “old and stuffy” (Debussy). He believed that such writing only limited and even hurt his music. Debussy could never succumb to any literary form. He wanted music to express human emotions in a way that is true and personal, and he believed that it could be achieved by removing such forms. Thus, *Zuleima* was replaced with a new idea –Baville’s *Diane au bois* (Debussy).

Debussy struggled with *Diane au bois* for a while, fearing he might have been overly ambitious. He could not find what he was looking for in the works of other composers and so he was compelled to create his own form. Some of the

initial ideas he had were to retain Wagner's technique of running from one scene into the next and to have a lyrical tone that was not absorbed by the orchestra. Debussy tried to keep the form at its simplest while still trying to express all of *Diane's* emotions (Debussy).

Debussy's initial excitement to reinvent his stylistic writing soon led to frustration and despondence. He became more unhappy and more eager to leave Rome. Having once shared all of his works and ideas with M. Vasnier, he became ashamed of his music and reluctant even to mention them in his letters to his old friend. Soon, he found it pointless even to respond to M. Vasnier's letters since he believed no one understood his situation nor could they help him out of it (Debussy).

One of the positive aspects of his stay in Rome was his friendship with Gustave Popelin, winner of the 1882 Prix de Rome for painting. Popelin was one of the reasons that Debussy remained at the Villa for as long as he did. Nevertheless, after spending two years as a requirement for the Prix de Rome, Debussy finally left Rome. His love for Mme. Vasnier played a heavy role in his decision to return to Paris. He had every intention of pursuing this relationship upon his return. However, it seems it did not happen. There is little mention of his relationship with Mme. Vasnier, and as mentioned in Chapter One, his friendship with M. Vasnier lasted only a few months after he left Rome (Debussy).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Some of Debussy's Struggles**

Debussy's limited childhood education had a lasting effect on his life and works. Debussy was born into a family of modest means in St Germain-en-Laye, a rural area to the west of Paris. Since his parents could not afford the finest education for their five children and his mother found them to be a nuisance, she farmed two of her children out to a relative and sent two others to school. Nevertheless, she favored Claude and kept him at home, teaching him herself how to read and write. He never received any kind of formal education until his first day at the Paris Conservatoire when he was ten years old (R. Nichols 5-6). There he received only music lessons and probably received no form of general education from that time on. His education was thus very elementary. Debussy often felt handicapped by this (Vallas 2). Later in life, Debussy spent time with intellectuals such as Emile Baron and Eugène Vasnier, who encouraged him to read and helped him keep up with the literature at the time (Debussy).

Since Debussy was the only child who stayed at home, he spent most of his time alone. His sister provided a description of him at the age of eight as "uncommunicative and closed in upon himself, liking neither his lessons nor his games... He would spend whole days sitting on a chair thinking, no one knew of what" (Lockspeiser 6). Even as an adult, Debussy always kept to himself. He had an intimate circle of friends and was awkward in social situations. Because of this, he was often misunderstood as being unfriendly or proud. Debussy's

elementary education, unfriendly manner, and social awkwardness became more apparent when he was finally placed in social settings at the Conservatoire. He struggled with this problem his entire life (Debussy).

Even though Debussy was born into a poor family, he had the habit of indulging in expensive things and living well beyond his means. Debussy's family was often under monetary distress and could not provide him with financial support as he grew older. His family had hoped for his success as a piano virtuoso to ameliorate their financial situation but that was not the case. He took on various jobs each summer with wealthy individuals and enjoyed their luxurious lifestyles. It was there that he first acquired his expensive taste. Meeting the wealthy Vasniers allowed him to continue with his lavish lifestyle (Cobb and Miller 39-40).

Debussy struggled as an emerging composer, especially with his luxurious habits. As mentioned in Chapter Two, he had resisted moving to Rome after winning the Prix de Rome but he eventually gave in because he needed the steady income from its stipend. His careless spending and his lack of income in his early career forced him to borrow money from his friends on many occasions. In one of his letters to Giuseppe Primoli, a friend from Rome, Debussy requested to borrow 500 francs to pay off a few debts and to buy Mme. Vasnier flowers. Debussy claimed he had received a threatening letter once from one of his creditors. There were also times when he could not pay his rent (Debussy).

Debussy's financial situation began to stabilize after marrying Emma Bardac. Part of the wealth came from marrying Emma, who was from a wealthy

family, and the other was from *Pelléas*' success. They moved into a luxurious townhouse on the avenue du Bois de Boulogne, away from all the city's commotion, where they had a small garden, two servants, and a governess. He was able to afford several vacations with Emma and Chouchou, his daughter, and even lived in a hotel for over a month while the boiler in his house was down. As part of *Pelléas*' success, Debussy travelled frequently to direct performances of the work and worked on other new pieces while he was home. However, this comfortable life did not last long for Debussy. When Emma started to become ill and needed care, Debussy was forced to turn down many moneymaking opportunities including the chance to direct *Pelléas* at the Boston Opera House. With all the expenses that followed Emma's illness and the restriction it placed on Debussy's ability to work, his finances quickly depleted. He wrote to Durand saying that he could no longer afford the "domestic demands of a material comfort" that he used to enjoy. Debussy's mother was also ill at this time. He could not give her the things she needed. Even though he was ashamed, he occasionally pressured Durand into giving him advances (Debussy).

Another of Debussy's struggles was his divorce from his first wife, Lilly Textier, to be with Emma Bardac. This event was a major turning point in his life, which affected him personally and professionally. In the summer of 1904, Debussy left Lilly and ran away to the countryside with Emma. He asked Durand to tell everyone, including his family, that he did not know Debussy's address. Lilly severely wounded herself in an attempt to commit suicide and this scandalous news spread throughout Paris. This occurred shortly after the



production of *Pelléas*, which made it the most popular conversational topic at the time. The press constantly harassed Debussy, accusing him of marrying for money (Lockspeiser 87). Those who were not fond of Debussy also tried to find fault with him regarding this matter. Debussy became frustrated at the situation, claiming he was not allowed to get a divorce like anyone else. Many of his good friends, including Pierre Louÿs, condemned his action and broke off their friendships with him. His divorce with Lilly finally came through a year later (Debussy).

## Chapter Four

### Debussy's Perception of Other Composers

#### *Introduction*

Debussy was never one to follow the norm. He was bored with the music of his time and spent most of his career trying to prevent his music from falling into the ordinary. Thus he recreated a new style of writing. However, his ideas did not appear overnight. Debussy studied the works of many composers, especially while he was at the Conservatoire and began to form opinions on their works. In realizing what he liked and disliked about music by these composers, he formulated a new idea of writing that was uniquely his. Debussy never cared much for the fame of these composers. He was merely interested in the art of their music.

#### *Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Orlande de Lassus*

Debussy drew inspiration from music as early as that of the Renaissance. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Orlande de Lassus were renowned composers of the sixteenth-century. Palestrina, born in Italy, served as an organist and choirmaster in several Catholic churches in Rome and wrote many masses, motets, and madrigals. He studied polyphonic techniques from earlier French and Flemish composers and effectively mastered them (Lockwood, O'Regan and Owens). Lassus was a Franco-Flemish composer. He spent his early childhood as a choirboy and grew up in a province where many prominent

musicians received musical training. He composed many liturgical and non-liturgical works (Haar). Even though Palestrina and Lassus lived in different countries they drew upon a common musical style.

Debussy admired the way Palestrina and Lassus employed counterpoint, believing them to be the “true masters” (Debussy 14). Debussy first mentioned them in a letter to M. Vasnier while he was living in Rome. He had just heard a mass by each of them in Santa Maria dell’ Anima and was amazed by the beauty of their works. He claimed that their vast knowledge of counterpoint made them capable of producing effects that led to their extraordinary music. About a mass by Palestrina, Debussy claimed:

Even though technically it’s very strict, the effect is of utter whiteness, and emotion is not represented (as has come to be the norm since) by dramatic cries but by melodic arabesques. The shaping of the music is what strikes you. And the arabesques crossing with each other to produce something which has never been repeated: harmony formed out of melodies. (Debussy 42)

Even though Debussy found traditional music writing techniques boring and tried to distance himself from them, he approved of Palestrina and Lassus’s simple yet rich contrapuntal lines. He admired the way their contrapuntal techniques brought “depth to the meaning of the words” and how the “melodic lines unroll and expand” (Debussy 14). Debussy found Lassus’s music to be “more decorative” and “human” than Palestrina’s (Debussy 42).

### *Johann Sebastian Bach*

Another early composer whom Debussy admired was the German composer and organist Johann Sebastian Bach. Debussy had a great appreciation for the way Bach approached music writing. Bach's works often highlight a single theme with contrapuntal lines. It is the centrality of the theme that appealed to Debussy. He criticized the works of some of his contemporaries who wrote complex contrapuntal music (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 453):

Sometimes the frame is so ornate, we don't realize the poverty of the central idea...It would be more profitable, I feel, to go about things the other way round, that's to say, find the perfect expression for an idea and add only as much decoration as is absolutely necessary...look at Bach, where everything conspires wonderfully to highlight the central idea and where the delicacy of the inner parts never absorbs the principal line. (Debussy 58)

Debussy believed that Bach found the perfect balance between simple and colorful music. He appreciated that Bach never restricted his music to a stringent form:

I feel more and more that music, by its very essence is not something that can flow inside a rigorous, traditional form. It consists of colours and of rhythmicized time... The rest of it's just a nonsense invented by feeling imbeciles on the backs of the masters who in most cases were writing no more than the music of

their period! Bach was the only one who saw ahead to the truth.  
(Debussy 184)

### *Jean-Philippe Rameau*

Jean-Philippe Rameau was a French composer also from the early eighteenth-century. He was the first to establish the fundamentals of music theory through the founding of inversions and modulations. He also realized the directionalities of music and coined the tonic, subdominant, and dominant as the “pillars of tonality”. He believed that melody was embedded in harmony (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 430-433).

Debussy admired Rameau’s lyrical lines. Debussy feared that the essence of music, upon which Rameau grounded his music, was being forgotten by the composers of the time. In a letter to Louis Laloy, Debussy claimed:

I’m delighted about your enthusiasm for Rameau. He deserves it for all the qualities in his music which ought to have protected us against Gluck’s deceitful grandiloquence, Wagner’s bombastic metaphysics and the old Belgian angel’s false mysticism; all of which we have clumsily adapted to a manner of understanding the exact opposite of what that music demands, while we continue, like vain children, to ignore the perfect taste and strict elegance which make up the consummate beauty of Rameau’s music. And, unfortunately, where there are signs that we’re turning to him again, it’s only out of idle curiosity. It’s almost impossible for us to

realize what we've lost in paying him so little attention, proud as we are of knowledge which was never intended for us and which might even be described as the negation of music...I feel a serious revolution is the only thing to get us out of this cosmopolitan stew.  
(Debussy 172)

Debussy claimed that Rameau had suddenly disappeared from history books. He felt the need to bring back Rameau's legacy in order to preserve the elegance of music. Debussy wrote a homage to Rameau and an article on his life and legacy in efforts to remind the music community of the importance of the roots he had established (Debussy 264). However, Debussy believed that a country should be entitled to its own unique music. Thus it is uncertain if Debussy's admiration towards Rameau's music originated from sincere appreciation for his works or a reverence towards national traditions.

### *Richard Wagner*

Debussy was a committed Wagnerian in the early years of his career. Richard Wagner was a German opera composer from the nineteenth century. He was also a conductor, poet, and author. Wagner was most known for reinventing traditional opera as music dramas. He believed in a concept called *Gesamtkunstwerk* whereby every aspect of a musical drama worked in "oneness". He also introduced *Leitmotiv* into his compositions by associating a specific character with a recurring musical phrase. In bringing together the various *Leitmotifs* from each character, Wagner was able to capture their

individual emotions and relay them to the audience. Wagner also pushed music to the limit by immensely experimenting with chromatic harmony (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 690-692).

Debussy shared his enthusiasm for Wagner with others, especially at Parisian cafés where symbolist writers and artists gathered. “Symbolism” and “Wagnerian” were one and the same at the time. Symbolist writers like Mallarmé and Verlaine even demonstrated their Wagnerian influence in their poetry and articles in the *Revue wagnérienne*. Debussy’s symbolist years were some of his most Wagnerian times (Millington, et al.). In a letter to a bookseller Emile Baron, Debussy claimed that Baron would have been a perfect friend if he appreciated Wagner’s works (Debussy 18).

A trip to Bayreuth in the late 1880s changed Debussy’s perception of Wagner. There he heard *Parsifal* and *The Mastersingers* (Lesure 52). Unfortunately, none of the letters written between 1888 and 1889 have survived, which prevents us from knowing the details of the trip and what prompted the decision.

Debussy believed that Wagner was the “old poisoner” to music of his time (Debussy 83). He wrote that the composers who emulated Wagner’s music were giving up their artistic freedom. He recognized that Wagner had produced good music but feared that the unparalleled success in Wagner’s new style of writing had stunted the growth of music at the time. Many were becoming comfortable with Wagner’s success and believed that music had reached its peak. Debussy believed that this was going to be harmful to his career because no one was

willing to accept any other new ideas (Debussy 44-45). While others believed that Wagner's works were new music replacing the old, Debussy argued that Wagner's works were in fact becoming old music and implored everyone to move on (Debussy 46). To some degree, Debussy began to evaluate the intelligence and artistic abilities of a person by their stance on Wagnerian music (Debussy 73).

Many composers from various countries also wanted to compose like Wagner. Debussy believed that a country should have its own unique music:

Wagner's ideas have had a bad influence on a lot of music and a lot of countries...The popular music of one's homeland must be used only as a basis, never as a procedure... So love this music as passionately as you wish, but don't dress it up in school uniform or put gold spectacles on its nose. (Debussy 232)

In a letter to Ernest Chausson, Debussy advised Chausson against Wagnerian music writing:

One thing I'd like to see you free yourself from is your preoccupation with the inner parts of the texture. By which I mean that too often we're concerned with the frame before we've got the picture; it was our friend Richard Wagner, I think, who got us into this fix. (Debussy 58)

He advised Chausson to find a perfect musical idea and to add "decorations" later if necessary. Debussy also struggled to get out of this "fix" when he first sought to create his own style, illustrating Wagner's influence on the music then. He



believed he needed to be protected from Wagner's "bombastic metaphysics" (Debussy 172). Debussy also believed that Wagner was a "victim of his own system" (Debussy 140). In Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Debussy was appalled by Wagner's interpretation of *Tristan* in his music:

The business with *Tristan* is simple. I read Bédier's *Roman de Tristan* when it first came out and was so struck by it I immediately had the idea of turning it into an opera. I felt it was necessary to give Tristan back his legendary characteristics, so badly deformed by Wagner and by the suspect, metaphysical approach which, there more than anywhere, resists explanation. (Debussy 180)

Debussy continued to avoid Wagner's music throughout his career. Debussy struggled for most of his career trying to bring his works and other composers' works out of Wagner's shadows. However, some composers were still content with feeding off of Wagner's success.

### *Igor Stravinsky*

Debussy and Igor Stravinsky were close friends, writing to one another not only about music but also about their families. Stravinsky was an influential composer of the twentieth-century. He was originally Russian but became naturalized as French and later American. Stravinsky composed many pieces for ballet. His musical style includes frequent changes in meter, abrupt

interruptions, use of ostinatos, dissonances, layering, and an antilyrical yet rich use of instruments (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 829-834).

Debussy was an admirer of Stravinsky's works. He claimed that Stravinsky played real music, which he said was rare among the musicians in Paris. He believed that Stravinsky alone had the ability to transform "mechanical souls into human beings" (Debussy 258). In a letter to Robert Godet, Debussy wrote:

Did you know that quite near you, in Clarens, there's a young Russian composer: Igor Stravinsky, who has an instinctive genius for colour and rhythm? I'm sure you'd like both him and his music...And 'he's not all tricks'. He writes directly for orchestra, without any intermediate steps, and the outline of his music follows only the promptings of his emotion. There are no precautions or pretensions. It's childish and savage. Even so, the organization is extremely delicate. (Debussy 250)

Debussy respected Stravinsky's courage in creating his own techniques in music writing. Debussy admired his artistic creativity. In a letter to Jacques Durand, Debussy commented on Stravinsky's *The Firebird*:

It's not perfect, but, in certain respects, it's an excellent piece of work none the less because the music is not the docile slave of the dance...And every now and then there are some extremely unusual combinations of rhythm! (Debussy 221)

## *Conclusion*

Debussy drew ideas in music from composers of different musical periods. He mostly admired composers from earlier musical eras because, he wrote, they used pure and simple styles to create beautiful music. The composers of his time, were trying so hard to create unique works that they exhausted every aspect of music available. Debussy created an amalgam of ideas from determining what he liked and disliked from various composers, reinventing them, and developing his own style.

## Chapter Five

### Debussy's Perception of Music

#### *Introduction*

Debussy shared many of his musical experiences with his friends through letters. These letters allow us to follow stylistic changes in his music over the years. There were instances in his life when Debussy made drastic changes to his ideas and music. During these times, Debussy often confided in his friends through his letters. He was emotional and expressive in his writings, which helps us understand him better as a person and as a composer.

#### *Influences of Education*

An understanding of Debussy's music education is important to understanding his perception of music. Debussy's musical education played an intricate role in shaping his perception of music later on in life. While his general education was minimal, he spent most of his life dedicated to studying music. Debussy's paternal aunt, Clementine, was the first to introduce him to music. His first piano instructor was Jean Cerutti, followed by Antoinette Mauté, who prepared him for his admittance to the Paris Conservatoire in 1872 (Lesure). There he was put through a rigorous curriculum whereby he had to be able to sight sing, transpose, and reproduce harmonies and counterpoints with speed and precision. Debussy excelled in his solfège class (Lockspeiser 9). Lavignac, his

instructor, immediately recognized Debussy's intuitiveness for music. He encouraged Debussy's love for unusual chords and rhythms. Debussy spent a lot of time learning from Lavignac, who in return helped Debussy appreciate the music theories and rules, which he had hated before (Vallas 4).

Debussy was not always successful in his classes. Some of the other classes he was required to attend were piano and harmony classes. His piano instructor, Marmontel, was much older and rooted in more conservative ideas. Debussy often improvised preludes and experimented with tonalities for which his elderly instructor had no patience (Vallas 5). Despite the many disagreements they had, Marmontel recognized Debussy's talent and love for music: "He doesn't like the piano much, but he does like music" (Lockspeiser 9). Many of his instructors also claimed that he was "a little backward in the rudiments" (Lesure). He also did not fare well in Émile Durand's harmony class. Durand was known to dislike teaching and his students, which would also explain Debussy's subpar results in the class (Lockspeiser 10).

Debussy's education at the Villa Medici was much less structured. After winning the Prix de Rome, Debussy moved to Rome as required of every winner. He did not receive any formal lessons there but was required to submit an *envoi* at the end of each year. For the first time, Debussy was no longer limited artistically and was free to compose as he wished. It was then that he began to create a new style of writing. Even though he never received any formal education after leaving the Conservatoire, Debussy continued to educate himself through books and discussions with intellectuals (Debussy).

### *Influences of the Visual Arts and Literature*

Debussy drew many of his ideas from various art forms and poetry. This was especially true when he was still searching for his own musical style. Since his general education was elementary, most of his knowledge on art and literature was self-taught. The symbolist movement had an especially strong influence on him. He spent much of his time at cafés where symbolist painters and writers often gathered. The symbolist movement in France in the late nineteenth-century was based on the idea that art and literature represent truths indirectly. Symbolists rejected naturalism and realism. Instead they geared their works toward mystery and the undefined. Debussy was intrigued by the movement and implemented many of its ideas in some of his works, including *La demoiselle élue* and *Cinq poems de Baudelaire*. But, it was not long before Debussy abandoned all Symbolist ideas in search of his own style (Lesure).

Debussy was also inspired by the visual arts. Even as a young boy, Debussy had thoughts of becoming a painter (Lockspeiser 6). Critics often compared Debussy to other painters when describing his musical works. He made a clear connection between music and art and drew upon ideas from painting in the development of his compositions. Debussy often borrowed words from the visual arts' vocabulary to describe his works since he developed his ideas like a painter:

I'm working on three nocturnes for solo violin and orchestra. In the first one the orchestra is strings only, in the second flutes, four

horns, three trumpets and two harps and in the third one both groups come together, it's an experiment, in fact, in finding the different combinations possible inside a single colour, as a painter might make a study in grey, for example. (Debussy 75)

Even though his student, Mademoiselle Worms de Romilly, suggested that Debussy regretted becoming a musician instead of a painter (Lesure), there were times when he appreciated music more:

Collect impressions. Don't be in a hurry to write them down. Because that's something music can do better than painting: it can centralize variations of colour and light within a single picture – a truth generally ignored, obviously as it is... You must even forget about music entirely from time to time. (Debussy 166)

Poetry was another one of Debussy's inspirations. M. Vasnier was the first to cultivate Debussy's interest in poetry, which led him to set many of his songs to poems by Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, and Banville, Bourget, and Verlaine. Another poetic influence originated from Debussy's frequent visits to Mallarmé's salon after he had returned from Rome. Mallarmé was an active believer in the "musicalization of poetry," which was one of the many influences on Debussy's music (Lesure). He was especially excited whenever he got to work with poets and writers. In a letter to the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio he claimed: "The very thought of working with you gives me a kind of *advance* fever" (Debussy 227). Debussy related well to the writers of his time because they were often looking for ways to "extract passionate lyricism" from the most basic things others

would find boring, which had been one of Debussy's primary goals throughout his career (Debussy 214).

### *Perception of Music during Debussy's Time*

Debussy was bored with the music from his era. Perhaps it was because he spent most of his youth studying "old" music or even because of his rebellious nature. He believed the musical community of his time was in need of beautiful music and spent most of his life trying to improve it. He served as a music critic for the *Mercure musical* under the name of M. Croche. He shared his opinions on music, making suggestions to improve the quality of music. He was disheartened by the responses to his articles. He claimed he was no longer in tune with the music of his time and was unable to fit in with the other writers in the *Mercure musical*.

Debussy was often frustrated with the musicians around him. He believed they were only concerned with outdoing each other in order to gain recognition. He thought that in their desperate attempts to capture the audience's attention, these composers were harming music by giving up artistry and quality. Debussy wanted to reestablish respect for music, claiming it should be more "guarded" (Debussy 168). This was especially true for music business at the time. Even though Debussy often struggled financially, he never considered his music to be a moneymaking business. Debussy had no interest in entertainment music or the music business, only in making artistic music:



But, between ourselves, do you really believe in 'humorous' music?  
For a start, it doesn't exist on its own; there always has to be a  
pretext, either words or a situation... Two chords with their feet in  
the air, or in any other curious position, will never be intrinsically  
humorous and could only become so in an empirical manner.  
(Debussy 177)

### *Influences of Non-western Music*

Debussy was first introduced to music outside of the western tradition at the Universal Exposition of 1889. The Javanese gamelan along with other East Asian music intrigued him. The scales went against all musical conventions he had learned and broadened his perspective. This experience was a major steppingstone in Debussy's artistic journey. His piano works later showed significant maturity as he boldly explored the natural resonance of the piano (Lesure).

### *Debussy's Perception of His Own Music*

Debussy never considered himself an Impressionist but he succumbed to this label after it was unceasingly imposed on him. Impressionism was originally a French movement in the late nineteenth century within the visual arts. The movement emphasized original techniques in relaying the perception or sensation of the human experience as opposed to merely presenting the immediate outlook of the subject (Seiberling). However, this term was eventually used in music to describe Debussy's work. When Debussy first

submitted *Printemps* as his *envoi* to the Académie des Beaux Arts, they were surprised by it. *Printemps* captured the sensation of life and living through a broad range of “musical color.” The Academy was unfamiliar with Debussy’s new style of writing and unhappy with this change. Thus the Académie des Beaux Arts labeled Debussy’s work as Impressionist in order to categorize and ridicule his work. However, the distinction that separates Debussy’s works from other Impressionist musicians is that he borrowed ideas. He often borrowed lines from folksongs and Spanish songs. He also failed to escape from other characteristics of traditional music because he was extensively trained in music at the Conservatoire (Pasler). However, because his aesthetic goals were similar to those of the true Impressionists at the time, Debussy’s works had succumbed to this label: “...I’m trying to write ‘something else’ – realities, in a manner of speaking – what imbeciles call ‘impressionism’, a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy...” (Debussy 188). Labeling Debussy’s works as Impressionist only allows for misconceptions regarding the originality and artistic qualities of his works.

Debussy had spent the early years of his career struggling to reinvent his music to produce a new style of writing. He found the traditional rules of writing to be “old and stuffy” (Debussy 8). He started to rebel even when he was studying at the Conservatoire. He felt that music consists of “colors” and “rhythmized time,” which cannot occur within the strict rules of traditional music (Debussy 184). Debussy’s first major step in composing outside of

convention happened when he was living in Rome. He was working on his first *envoi*, *Zuleima*, when he finally realized he detested conventional music writing:

Those great stupid lines bore me to death – the only thing great about them is their length – and my music would be in danger of sinking under the weight. Another thing, and more important, is that I don't think I'll ever be able to cast my music in a rigid mould. I hasten to add I'm not talking about musical form, merely from the literary point of view. I would always rather deal with something where the passage of events is to some extent subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human feelings. That way, I think, music can become more personal, more true to life; you can explore and refine your means of expression.

(Debussy 8)

One of the greatest difficulties Debussy had with this new concept of writing was in trying to portray the human emotions such that the audiences were able to experience them, what many refer to as Impressionism. In *Diane*, Debussy struggled to display different types of emotions simultaneously: "...the idea must be beautiful but cold –it mustn't give any hint of passion" (Debussy 15).

Debussy claimed to be a simple man who only sought the impossible in music (Debussy 98). One of Debussy's ultimate goals in music writing was to be able to bring out the richest color from the simplest musical line: "I'm after music that is supple and concentrated enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul and the whims of reverie" (Debussy 13). He wanted to

prevent the lyrical tone from being “absorbed by the orchestra” (Debussy 13). When working on *Diane*, he expressed the difficulty in keeping a simple form while trying to portray the many emotions a character experiences (Debussy 16). He also struggled with maintaining the interest of the music while trying to portray a character within the needed amount of time. Despite all that, he was never afraid of having too little for as long as he was properly portraying his music (Debussy 101).

Debussy was always experimenting with new ways of writing, fearing his music might one day become mundane. He refuted the idea that one should ever commit to a single style of writing because it was once successful (Debussy 141-142). He experimented with many ways of writing characteristic phrases: “I found myself using, quite spontaneously too, a means of expression which I think is quite unusual, namely silence (don’t laugh). It is perhaps the only way to give the emotion of a phrase its full value” (Debussy 56). In a letter to Durand, he also claimed to have found a new way of writing for voices in *Le Diable* that furthered his incentives for simplicity (Debussy 171). Even after receiving recognition for his works, Debussy continued to struggle with producing more unique works. He strove for perfection and often spent several years writing each piece before publishing it. In the case of his *Nocturnes*, Debussy returned to them years later to make the changes necessary to perfect them (Debussy 286).

### *Conclusion*

Debussy dedicated his life to making art. Despite the many criticisms and opposing opinions he received, Debussy never succumbed to the norm. He persistently pursued his music and challenged the musical community of his time. He spent much of this time trying to perfect his music, with the detailed and unique techniques, such that they resembled pieces of artwork. It is, however, uncertain if Debussy was ever truly satisfied with his works.

## Chapter Six

### Debussy's Perception of His Own Works

#### *Introduction*

Debussy spent most of his career trying to find new ways to express his music. He mentioned some of his best works in his letters because those were the ones he demanded new ideas from and allowed himself to struggle through. He experimented with harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture, and form during his search for new stylistic writing. Debussy claimed that his music was a disdain for fixed structure. It also has no regard for tonality because his pieces were written in a way that captured every nuance (Debussy 84). Debussy never settled on a specific form of writing. He was always trying to create something new and throughout his exploration was associated with the symbolist and impressionist movements. However, not all of Debussy's works were new and innovative. He wrote many works using the classical writing traditions imparted to him by the teachers from the Paris Conservatoire before he became bored and decided that such music was not for him.

#### *Zuleima*

*Zuleima* was the last piece Debussy wrote before he changed his stylistic writing in 1885. After writing *Zuleima*, thinking that it would be submitted as his first envoi, Debussy had a sudden change of heart. He was becoming bored with the music from his time and wanted to find a new style of writing. The piece has

not survived. Debussy claimed that it resembled the works of Verdi and Meyerbeer, which implies that it had Romantic qualities. This was not the kind of music Debussy was interested in writing. After many years of yielding to the traditional ways of composing, as he was taught to do at the Paris Conservatoire, he finally grew tired of them, claiming that they were “too old and too stuffy.” He was afraid that these old ways of writing would hold him back and that their lengthy and boring lines might weigh down his music (Debussy 8).

Debussy refused to have his music conform to a rigid form. The primary goal of his music was to capture human emotions and feelings while the shape of the music merely conformed to the passage of events (Debussy 8): “I’m after music that is supple and concentrated enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul and the whims of reverie” (Debussy 13). He believed that in allowing the human feelings to shape music, it can become “more personal, more true to life; you can explore and refine your means of expression” (Debussy 8).

### *Diane au bois*

Debussy experimented with a new style of writing for the first time in *Diane au bois*. He was already working on this piece before he moved to Rome but he finally completed and submitted it as his first *envoi* in 1886. *Diane au bois* was a ‘comédie héroïque’ written by the French poet and writer Theodore de Banville (Debussy 8). Since Banville had no initial intentions on setting *Diane au bois* to music, the scenes were long and it was difficult for Debussy to keep the

music in this piece interesting (Debussy 16). Nevertheless, Debussy chose this text because it was different from the poems composers often used in their *envois*. He considered those pieces to be “improved cantatas,” which was exactly what he was trying to move away from (Debussy 8). Debussy struggled because there was no precedence to what he was trying to accomplish. Debussy was afraid that this leap into something completely new was overly ambitious (Debussy 13). Since this was the first time Debussy was exercising his artistic freedom, he had many new ideas for his piece, which made the writing process more challenging:

*Diane* is giving me a lot of trouble. I can't manage to find a musical idea that gives me the look of her, as I imagine it. In fact it's quite difficult, because the idea must be beautiful but cold – it mustn't give any hint of passion. Love comes to Diane only much later and then it's only really by accident; I'll have to get it across through the transformation of this idea, step by step as Diane loses her resistance to love, but the idea must keep the same contour throughout. (Debussy 14-15)

He wanted to portray all the emotions of *Diane* while still keeping the music simple. He also wanted the tone to be lyrical and not absorbed by the orchestra. Despite the difficulties Debussy faced, he was determined not to fall back into the old ways of Wagner. He was trying to recreate every aspect of his music, claiming that the only thing he would keep from Wagner was how his music went from one scene to another without stopping.



### *Printemps*

*Printemps* was the first of Debussy's works to be regarded as Impressionist. The Institut de France imposed this title on him when he submitted this piece as his second *envoi* from Rome. He was trying to recreate different sensations in this piece. He wanted to portray the human feelings of experiencing spring instead of merely describing it through his music: "I wanted to express the slow, laborious birth of beings and things in nature, then the mounting florescence and finally a burst of joy at being reborn to a new life, as it were" (Debussy 20). Debussy was also strongly against having program notes in concerts, which compelled him to write music that was powerful enough to evoke the same reaction from an audience to those who have been given program notes (Debussy 21).

Debussy was searching for a new color in his music. Despite the fact that *Printemps* is a symphonic suite with chorus, the choral part of the piece is wordless. The focus is still on the orchestra and the voices are like instruments that are part of it. Debussy was searching for a blend of the different timbres between the instruments and the voices. They were to complement each other while one cannot overpower the other (Debussy 24).

### *Pelléas et Mélisande*

*Pelléas et Mélisande* was one of Debussy's most well-received works during his time. Debussy was searching for new ways to write better characteristic phrases in this opera. He avoided the use of stereotypes and

leitmotifs (Debussy 251). He wanted the portrayal of the human emotions to be profound and accurate. He found silence a valuable technique during the process: “It is perhaps the only way to give the emotion of a phrase its full value” (Debussy 56). Debussy tried to capture every detail in writing this piece: “I tried to capture all the mystery of the night and the silence in which a blade of grass roused from its slumber makes an alarming noise” (Debussy 80).

### *Other Works*

Debussy had unique goals for each of his works. In *Images*, Debussy discovered “harmonic chemistry” and was trying to write his music on realities, something that is often misconstrued as Impressionism (Debussy 155, 188). In his *Trois Nocturnes*, he focused on bringing “life and freedom” into the orchestral lines (Debussy 93). Aside from manipulating the harmonic nuances of his works, he also made physical changes to the orchestral group in order to achieve his goals. He split up the orchestra in his first set of *Nocturnes* to attain various nuances within each group. He also suggested putting some of the orchestra directly on stage in *Pelléas et Mélisande* in order to get a rich-colored sound for the death of *Mélisande* (Debussy 73). Debussy found a new way of writing vocal lines in *Le diable dans le beffroi* in order to achieve simple and flexible writing (Debussy 171). “These are still the moments when I come closest to satisfying my taste for the inexpressible! If, as I hope, I succeed with this exploration of anguish, which is what *La Chute de la maison Usher* will be, then I feel I’ll have made a useful contribution to music” (Debussy 220).

### *Conclusion*

Debussy's works are a direct reflection of his stylistic interests at the time. He was never one to conform to the old ways of writing. Debussy was constantly finding new goals and discovering new ways to achieve them because he refused to fall back into old writing habits again. Since Debussy's goal was to express different human experiences and feelings, he had an endless selection of new stylistic possibilities.

## Conclusion

Debussy's letters provide an untainted view of his life. It is important to view Debussy's life from his perspective not only to understand him as a person but also as a composer. One of the recurring themes from Debussy's letters is the heavy influence that people had on him. In his letters, Debussy discussed his relationships, ideas for his own music, opinions on various matters, and other experiences.

Debussy was a private man who needed friends to help him through each day. He only had a few close lifelong friends but they were imperative to his success. It is evident from the letters that Debussy was an affectionate man. Not many people have seen this side of him because his dearest friends were the only ones on its receiving end. It was only through his letters that Debussy revealed some of the most vulnerable moments of his life. Even though he often kept to himself, it is also evident from Debussy's letters that he needed his friends. Debussy was easily discouraged and suffered from many downfalls in his life ranging from his work to his marriage. His letters show that he relied on the compassions of his friends during these times.

Debussy confided his struggles to his friends. He was a complicated man, which is ironic because he spent most of his life trying to create "simple" music. He spent most of his early childhood in isolation and the rest of his life focused on music. When he grew older, music was the only thing he knew and the only thing he could do. He became aware of his limitations and struggled to change it.

Debussy always strived for more in every aspect of his life. He always lived well beyond his means, which led to his financial difficulties. He asked for advances from his publishers or borrowed from friends and professional creditors. His letters reveal his desperation throughout these events and a clear insight into how he struggled. He was an avant-garde composer who wanted to live a comfortable life but could not afford that lifestyle. He struggled with his marriages, especially his divorce and the falling out with some of his closest friends as a result.

The Prix de Rome was a terrible experience for Debussy but a great stepping-stone to his career. Debussy had a knowledgeable mentor and an ongoing romance at the time he had to leave Paris. He was happy with the comfortable lifestyle he had in Paris and the idea of leaving all that for a place where he could be alone and isolated again was not appealing. During his time there, Debussy wrote diligently to M. Vasnier with details depicting his life at the Villa Medici. He struggled with himself the entire time he was in Rome about whether to leave. Despite the fact that he needed the stipend, a major incentive for Debussy to stay was the lack of curriculum in Rome. For the first time within an institution, Debussy was given absolute freedom to compose. It was at Rome that he decided to plunge into an unprecedented style of writing. To distract himself from all the unpleasantness in Rome, Debussy kept himself busy with his work. Without all the fun and romance that he would have had in the comfort of Paris, Debussy was able to find an entirely new way of expressing his music.

Debussy's novel stylistic writing was an amalgam of all that he liked and an exclusion of what he disliked in music. Debussy had strong opinions on most composers. He was tired of music from his time because they were trying to include too much within their music in order to stand out from each other. He admired the early composers who kept their music simple and pure. Debussy was constantly on the search for something new. Thus he never settled on a specific formula for writing music. With his broad knowledge in art, literature, and music, Debussy was continuously trying to do something new. The arts were seemingly limitless to him. Debussy's music changed just as he did. During his search, Debussy experimented with many philosophical and artistic ideas, which are evident in his music.

Debussy's letters are detailed records of his experiences and thoughts. His works were heavily influenced by his experiences, which make closely studying his life imperative for understanding his works. Debussy was an artist who spent his whole life devoted to keeping the integrity of music and contributing something new to music. Debussy's life was not always easy but his career in music was the only thing he never gave up on despite all the struggles he faced. He had a great love for music and a deeper appreciation for the arts.

Debussy's letters revealed only a small fraction of who he really was. There are many questions that are unanswered and some have even developed from reading his letters. Many details regarding Debussy's earlier life before he moved to Rome were hinted upon but never fully answered, such as his relationship with his parents and siblings and how he became interested in

music. Nevertheless, this small account on Debussy's life has unraveled many truths about who he was.

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